

## **The Origins of the Atemporal Film**

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### **THE TEMPORAL REVOLUTION**

The fundamental theoretical effort of the twentieth century was the attempt to integrate time into thought. Though there were anticipations of this effort in early centuries, the twentieth century is the époque when concern for time comes to the foreground across disparate intellectual and cultural arenas. This effort did not simply take time as an object of thought but instead worked to reveal the intrinsic temporality of both thought and being. Time had to become a matter of form and not just content. This theoretical endeavor manifested itself from the novels of Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust to Albert Einstein's special and general theories of relativity to the philosophical movements of vitalism and phenomenology. Though time played a role in art, science, and philosophy prior to the twentieth century, it often remained in the background, whereas the twentieth century would insist on its absolute theoretical centrality.

The historical novels of Honoré de Balzac and Walter Scott depict the unfolding of time, but they do not register time directly through their formal structure in the way that Woolf and Proust would. Characters act in time, but the narrators that recount their lives do so from a perspective outside time or only implicitly temporal.<sup>1</sup> This perspective disappears in the Modernist novel. Akin to the early novelists, Isaac Newton grants time a position in classical physics, but he can grasp it only as an absolute background against which events occur that the physicist works to understand. For Einstein, time becomes a variable that changes according to spatial position and speed of motion, which

allows him to see its power in shaping the position from which the physicist knows. Time ceases to be what we know and becomes more explicitly part of how we know. Philosophy undergoes the same type of shift. Even though Immanuel Kant registers time as a form of the subject's experience rather than simply as a known object, he retains the transcendental subject as a reference point not bound by time, in a way that Martin Heidegger would correct by replacing subjectivity with Dasein or being-there, which is an inherently temporal being. In art, science, and philosophy, a shift toward temporality makes itself felt through a series of revolutions in form.<sup>2</sup>

The historical difficulty of integrating time into thought stems from its obscure obviousness. That is, everyone knows what time is, and no one can give a satisfying explanation of it. As Saint Augustine famously puts it, "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know."<sup>3</sup> Time goes without saying but also resists any saying. The attempt to put time into words necessarily leads to paradoxes, such as those of Zeno or John McTaggart. (For Zeno, the flight of an arrow demonstrates the irreconcilability of the instant of time with movement; for McTaggart, the impossibility of defining time without presupposing an understanding of it reveals its unreality.<sup>4</sup>) Time remains paradoxical as long as we view it as an external field to be known rather than as the terrain through which we know. The shift to the latter position occurs in Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narration, in Einstein's conception of temporal relativity, and in Heidegger's understanding of temporality as the necessary condition of our being.<sup>5</sup>

The revolutionary conceptions of time that emerge in the twentieth century all have an implicitly ethical dimension. By integrating temporality into thought, the great figures of the twentieth century work to shatter the isolation of the subject that has plagued modernity since Descartes and open the subject to some form of otherness.<sup>6</sup> Temporal thinking is ethical because it recognizes that the subject is not a self-contained or complete entity but rather an existent that always surpasses itself and exists outside of itself. It is defined by its incompleteness and thus has an unavoidable involvement with others. This type of thinking also strips away any conception of an authority existing outside of time and not subject to its exigencies. This is why Proust forbids his narrator a position outside time from which he could summarize events of the narrative in the manner of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novelist.<sup>7</sup> Though the characters in earlier novels exist

in time, the modern novel inserts the narrator and the act of narration into time, a gesture that subverts the narrator's god-like position of authority. Even Einstein's special relativity, which he conceived without any consideration of ethics at all, has an ethical weight insofar as it dethrones an absolute conception of time and grants each locality its own valid time. What Newton theorizes as universally true becomes not invalid but rather locally valid in the universe of special and general relativity.<sup>8</sup>

It is in philosophy, however, that the ethics of temporality becomes most apparent. The great failure of the history of Western philosophy, according to Heidegger, lies in its inability to think temporality as the basis of being itself. This failure produces the idea of stable essences, including that of the subject, that fall into time rather than emerging out of it. As long as we continue to think of time as added to being, we will view ourselves and others as completed objects. In Heidegger's conception, a proper sense of temporality allows us to grasp ourselves as constantly self-transcending. Unlike the traditional subject, Heidegger's Dasein finds its being only through its temporality, which opens it to the otherness of its own future and of other beings. Grasping our temporality permits us to recognize otherness in a way that Western philosophy has been systematically unable to do. This is the ethical valence of the temporal revolution.

Though Heidegger and Henri Bergson conceive of our temporality in ethics terms, Emmanuel Levinas stands out as the spokesperson for the ethics of temporality. Though he played a large role in bringing German phenomenology to France, he reproaches Heidegger and other phenomenologists for failing to see fully the ethical implications of temporality. A grasp of temporality is indissociable from and emerges out of the experience of otherness. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas articulates this link. He points out that "time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but . . . the very relationship of the subject with the Other."<sup>9</sup> The encounter with the other and the other's demand on us makes us aware of ourselves as incomplete and thus existing in time. Our responsibility vis-à-vis the other is always a future responsibility—a duty that we must accomplish in time. The other and the future are existentially akin insofar as they force us out of our self-isolation and require our self-transcendence. One's attitude toward time is at once one's attitude toward the other. Someone who uses time or views it as a means to be exploited for profit will take up this same attitude toward the other. Many of the main currents of twentieth-century philosophy are

committed to countering this position in all of its manifestations by adopting an ethics of time.

The ethics of time that dominates the twentieth century has a natural home in the most temporal of the arts. According to D. N. Rodowick, "what most powerfully affects us in film is an ethics of time."<sup>10</sup> When we go to the cinema, we submit to an experience that constantly foregrounds the passing of time. Rodowick adds, "an ontological examination of the medium, no matter how variable or unfinished, leads to the surprising conclusion that what we have valued in film are our confrontations with time and time's passing."<sup>11</sup> The cinema teaches us to value time even as it emphasizes time's fleetingness. In this sense, one always goes to the cinema with the other, even when one is alone in the theater. This link between cinema and the twentieth century's ethics of time derives from the intrinsic temporality of the filmic medium.

## TIME PASSES

From its inception, cinema has privileged time. The essence and the appeal of the cinematic art are inextricable from the experience of temporality that it offers spectators. Whatever else films explore, they inherently take temporality as their subject due to the nature of the medium. Whatever occurs in the filmic image—or between filmic images—occurs within the temporality of the film's projection. Every film orders time in some fashion or other, and the privileged role that time plays in cinematic art distinguishes film from all other arts. That is, the way that a film orders time shapes its status as a work of art.

The audience experiences painting, sculpture, and photography on its own time. The works of art in these media exist without any intrinsic temporal exigencies, and this allows viewers to observe them at whatever pace is convenient for them. Though literature, drama, and dance appear to emphasize temporality to the same extent that the cinema does—one can't imagine a play that doesn't impose a certain temporal structure on its audience—the role of time in each is contingent rather than necessary. Though reading a poem requires a certain amount of time, nothing regulates the pace of one's reading and thus the allotment of time that the poem demands. Though each performance of a play lasts a specific time, this time is variable and not essential to the play as a work of art. The text of *Hamlet* does not include the time that its performance must take, and the experience of watching a performance

of *Hamlet* can remain more or less the same even when the length of the performance changes. The same cannot be said of a film, in which the time must remain the same for each showing.<sup>1 2</sup> Changing a film's running time—even cutting or adding just a few seconds—effectively changes a film, whereas the performance time of a dance or a play inevitably varies, at least by a few seconds.

The one art that seems to foreground temporality as rigorously as the cinema is music. Musical pieces are organized temporally: an artist composes by distributing different sounds in a temporal order. But like drama and dance, musical pieces can vary according to the performance. One orchestra might take sixty-two minutes to play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony; another might take seventy-four minutes. Though artists often record music, music is not necessarily recorded in the way that cinema is because music can be recorded live, yet there is no such thing as a live performance of a film. The absence of a live recording of a film—its necessarily recorded status—forces every film to thematize time, regardless of whether the film artist wishes it.<sup>13</sup>

Though digital recording and editing have changed some filmic practices, they have not changed the time-based nature of film, and in this sense, one can continue to talk about digitally recorded films as “films,” although the term is technically misleading.<sup>14</sup> As Peter Wollen notes, “The important point to note is that film and video, unlike painting or sculpture, are both explicitly time-based media.”<sup>15</sup> The particular arrangement of time constitutes a film as a work of art as much as the visual images that the film presents. Even films that primarily present a series of still images, like Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), nonetheless highlight temporality through their avoidance of the moving image. Every film betrays some particular conception of temporality.<sup>16</sup>

For many theorists, the genius of cinema lies in its ability to permit the spectator an authentic experience of time without the obstacles that confound the experience of time outside the cinema. While watching a film that highlights the movement of time, spectators find themselves submitted to time rather than feeling themselves separated from its movement, which is the position that we tend to occupy in our everyday lives. Film alerts us to the constitutive role that time plays in our existence.<sup>17</sup> In films that produce what Gilles Deleuze calls time-images, time becomes the source of action and movement rather than just the arena in which movement occurs, as it is in what he calls

the movement-image. Though he sees the time-image emerging in the post-World War II era with Italian Neorealism and the films of Orson Welles, Deleuze believes that it nonetheless represents the essence of cinematic art.<sup>18</sup> The time-image shows the ontological priority of time by taking the focus away from action that unfolds in chronological or spatialized time. Instead, the spectator experiences time directly through, say, Welles's depth of field, which juxtaposes past and present in a single shot. Early cinema's focus on the priority of movement—evident in films as disparate as the Lumière shorts and Eisenstein's silent masterpieces—represents a false start that serves to set the stage for the modern cinematic revolution that takes the thematization of temporality as its point of departure.

Time passes in the cinema, and the cinematic spectator experiences the flow of time in all its inexorableness. This is what attracts phenomenological and existentialist thinkers to the cinema. They see in the cinematic experience a possible relation to time that will challenge time's usual externality for the subject. Though they may not explicitly align their thinking about film with phenomenology, major film theorists André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer value the cinema for the phenomenological revelation that it makes possible. The cultural importance of film for each lies not in the ideas that particular films might communicate but in the revelation of the temporality of experience through an experience of temporality. Cinema's inherent thematization of time predisposes filmmakers to focus on transient phenomena—like a plastic bag caught by a swirling wind—because it punctuates their fleetingness and allows the spectator to experience it as such.<sup>19</sup> Film reveals temporality to its spectators by immersing them in it without respite, and as a result, they can experience temporality in a singular way in the cinema. The revelation of the subject's fundamental temporality, for theorists like Bazin and Kracauer, is one of the cinema's chief philosophical tasks, a task that is especially exigent in a modern world that increasingly distorts time and our experience of temporality.<sup>20</sup>

## TURNING AWAY FROM TIME

But there is also another possibility for cinema that has become fully visible only with the competition brought by digital technology. As the threat of television in the 1950s produced a reimagining of cinematic space in the form of Cinerama, Cinemascope, and even 3D projection,

the digital threat (embodied by videogames, virtual reality, the Internet, and so on) has led to the restructuring of cinematic time. Since the explosion of the digital era in the middle of the 1990s, a new temporal aesthetic in cinema has grown in response, one that approximates the experience of the digital world. Though there have been isolated films (like *Betrayal* [David Hugh Jones, 1983]) that have employed a nonlinear temporality throughout the history of cinema, the contemporary turn away from chronology is both broader and deeper than any historical antecedent. A large group of films has emerged in response to the change in temporality effected by the digital era. This series includes *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Eye of God* (Tim Blake Nelson, 1997), *Following* (Christopher Nolan, 1998), *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001), *Ju-On* (Takashi Shimizu, 2002), *11:14* (Greg Marcks, 2003), *The Machinist* (Brad Anderson, 2004), *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005), *Shi gan* (Time, Kim Ki-duk, 2006), *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007), and *The Girlfriend Experience* (Steven Soderbergh, 2009). Rather than providing an experience of the forward movement of time, these films scramble temporality through the creation of a narrative structure that defies a forward moving chronology.<sup>21</sup>

Though the flashback and flash forward have been staples of cinema since early in the talkie era, these devices have traditionally occurred within a typical chronology. They functioned as clearly marked detours along a linear chronological path that moved toward the future. Rather than subverting a sense of the temporal movement of a film, the use of flashback and flash forward have tended to emphasize temporality. The flashbacks in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), for instance, reveal the movement of time through the changing image of Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles). And in film noir, flashback works to define the pastness—and thus the fated nature—of the events depicted. More dramatic departures from chronology have appeared in science fiction films, such as the five films of the *Planet of the Apes* series or Tim Burton's 2001 remake of the first one.<sup>22</sup> These films and numerous others of the genre depict time breaking from typical linearity and looping back on itself. But in each case the disturbance in cinematic time is simply a manifestation of a disturbance of time within the story. It is typically driven by concerns for content rather than form, and it conforms to the expectations of the genre. What stands out about the group of contemporary films that adopt an atemporal narrative structure

is their distance from science fiction as a genre.

The atemporal cinematic mode does not distort forward-moving time simply because of the demands of story, as is the case with science fiction. Its distortions are instead formal ones. The distortion of time takes place in the filmic discourse (what Russian Formalism calls the *syuzhet*); that is, it occurs in the way that the story (or *fabula*) is told, not in the story itself. Some implicit version of this distortion is present in every film that involved editing or even projection, as both processes take time apart and reassemble it. In this sense, the possibility for an atemporal cinema has always existed alongside cinema's aesthetic commitment to temporality. But with the atemporal mode, cinema's manipulation of time becomes evident and thematically resonant.

Though sometimes the films in the atemporal mode depict stories in which time becomes distorted (as it does in science fiction time travel narratives), the distortion of the filmic discourse in atemporal cinema always goes beyond and amplifies that of the story. With these films, the story's temporal distortion cannot fully explain that of the filmic discourse. This is evident in the case of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), where a procedure for erasing memories in the story disrupts the diegetic time (or the time of the film's story). *Eternal Sunshine* belongs to the atemporal mode because its discourse doesn't just recount the jumbled time of the story in the manner of *Planet of the Apes* but creates an excess temporal distortion beyond what the story requires. When the discourse simply follows the temporal distortion of the story, it does not challenge the temporal structure of the cinema itself. Science fiction films show time travel happening and allow spectators to observe it; atemporal cinema enacts the distortion of time and forces the spectator to experience this distortion through the act of watching the film. Watching these films involves living through a temporal confusion.

In some cases, this distinction becomes difficult to sustain. In *The Lake House* (Alejandro Agresti, 2006), for example, the depiction of two different times existing simultaneously is the story, but the way that the film shows these two times as coexisting is part of the filmic discourse. In order to follow the story, the discourse must deviate from the temporal nature of typical filmic discourse. This breakdown between story and discourse becomes even more pronounced with the films of David Lynch. In *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), and *Inland Empire* (2006), the story itself involves time looping around and

moving in a circular fashion. But in the act of expressing this story, the discourse itself must undergo a profound transformation. Like *The Lake House*, Lynch's films both belong and don't belong to the atemporal cinematic mode because the atemporal discourse is the result of the exigencies of specific stories that involve the distortion of time.<sup>23</sup>

What unites the key films in the atemporal mode is the attempt to introduce spectators to an alternative way of experiencing existence in time—or, more exactly, a way of experiencing existence outside of our usual conception of time. Time in these films doesn't bring about a different future but instead an incessant repetition. Despite their generic and thematic diversity, the distortion of chronological time in these films has a shared motivation: in each case, they distort time not simply because of the exigencies of plot but in order to reveal the circular logic of what psychoanalysis calls the drive. Contemporary atemporal cinema is a cinema of the drive, in which narrative is oriented around a foundational moment of traumatic loss. Understanding this cinema requires grasping this fundamental psychoanalytic idea.

### THE DRIVE'S PHILOSOPHY OF TIME

Even more than the unconscious (which has received much more attention), the drive perhaps constitutes the essence of psychoanalytic thought. As Freud sees it, the drive is the result of the collision between the instincts of the biological organism and the demands of the social order that confront this organism. The subject that this collision produces is neither a purely biological entity (governed by instincts) nor a purely cultural identity (constructed by the presuppositions of the social order). By insisting on the foundational status of the drive for the subject, psychoanalysis opts for a third way between a biological understanding and a cultural one. But this third way is not simply a merging of biology and culture. The collision between nature and culture produces a subject who is no longer at home in the natural world and is at the same time alienated in the world of culture. The drive separates the subject from both nature and culture.

The social order constitutes itself by confronting each individual who enters it with a demand for the sacrifice of existence without restriction. Entering society means accepting that one cannot do just as one pleases. The loss of unrestricted existence that occurs when one enters society forms the subject of the drive. But the initial loss has a

deceptive appearance that distorts the subject's experience of the drive. It appears to the subject as if it has lost something substantial—that the unrestricted existence it has sacrificed holds the ultimate enjoyment—and thus the subject searches for the object that might return it to this mythic time. In fact, the loss is itself primordial and constitutive for the subject, which is why every attempt to return fails. No subjectivity exists prior to this structuring loss.

Psychoanalytic thought distinguishes between the concepts of desire and drive in order to differentiate two possible attitudes toward the initial loss. Desire is predicated on the belief that it is possible to regain the lost object and thereby discover the ultimate enjoyment. Desire represents a belief that a satisfying object exists and can be obtained. In contrast, the drive locates enjoyment in the movement of return itself—the repetition of the loss, rather than in what might be recovered. As Adrian Johnston puts it, “drives come to enjoy the very failure to reach the impossible goal, whereas desire is permanently dissatisfied with the inaccessibility of its goal.”<sup>24</sup> Our desire runs up against a perpetual stumbling block: when we obtain the object that we desire, we do not discover satisfaction but another object to desire. This continual frustration of desire—this failure to obtain the truly satisfying object—is the precise way that the drive satisfies itself. Through the drive, the subject finds satisfaction in the repetition of the failure and loss that initially constitutes it.

From the perspective of the drive, the goal or object that it seeks is nothing but a tool for facilitating repetition, which is where enjoyment actually lies. We require the deception of the pleasurable goal in order to submit to the enjoyment of the repetition of loss. In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” Freud makes an important distinction between the aim of a drive and its object. Though the aim, according to Freud, “is in every instance satisfaction,” the object is “the thing in regard to which or through which” the drive finds this satisfaction.<sup>25</sup> The drive doesn't achieve satisfaction by obtaining the object but through the act of failing to obtain it. The object promises to rectify our sense of loss, but our aim is altogether different. The pursuit of the lost object serves as an alibi for the repetition of loss and the satisfaction that this repetition provides. The desire for the lost object hides the drive to repeat its loss.

The idea that the subject might find satisfaction in the repetition of loss appears bizarre at first glance. Obviously, people are consciously trying to succeed at what they do. Our entire conscious life operates



around the idea of avoiding loss and successfully obtaining more objects. We associate enjoyment with acquisition in some form or other—acquisition of money, of a romantic partner, of a new job, of peacefulness, of friends, and so on. Though we take a fleeting pleasure in success, we can enjoy loss—and only loss—because it is only through loss that we emerge as desiring beings. The repetition of the loss that constitutes our subjectivity brings satisfaction because it returns us to our lost object, an object that ceases to exist once we have it. Subjects find their successes unsatisfying—even the most successful are constantly looking elsewhere—insofar as successfully having our object has the effect of destroying it as a lost object and thus as desirable.

The fact of the drive—and psychoanalytic thought in general—demands an atemporal attitude. In this sense, psychoanalysis represents a countercurrent to the major movements of twentieth century thought. Rather than affirming the primacy of time, it insists on the subject's resistance to temporal change.<sup>26</sup> The repetition of the drive provides the foundational horizon for the subject, and no amount of time will allow the subject to transcend this horizon. The only possibility that the future offers is that of a new form of repetition. Although one can change jobs or lovers, one cannot change the fundamental structure of one's subjectivity. The point is not that time is just an illusion (as it is for Parmenides and the Eleatic philosophers) or that it is just a form of appearance (as it is for Plato) but that time does not hold within it the promise of openness and difference.

Escaping the lure of this promise requires thinking atemporally because the promise inheres within the very idea of time. As Yuval Dolev notes, even those who insist on the determined and fixed nature of the future implicitly assume its fundamental openness. In *Time and Realism*, Dolev contends, "It's a feature of *time* that the past is fixed and the future open. It's against this fact that doctrines can be conjured up that would render the past mutable and the future fixed."<sup>27</sup> As long as we think in terms of temporality, we cannot escape the image of a future full of possibilities, even if we theoretically explain it away. That is to say, we cannot accede to the logic of the drive and remain caught within the lures of desire. When we desire, we look to the future as the time in which we will obtain the object and fulfill our desire. Time, like desire, provides respite from the interminable nature of the drive.

It is not enough to take a tenseless approach to time, as many philosophers of time have done. According to the tenseless view, past,

present, and future have no real status but exist only as convenient tools for our communication with each other. The only real temporal distinctions are relational ones—earlier, later, and simultaneous.<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Russell is the most famous exponent of this position. He attributes past, present, and future to the experience of a perceiving subject, while relations of earlier and later, as he sees it, occur objectively. But even Russell and his followers allow that in our daily practice we cannot avoid taking up a different attitude toward the past and the future in which the future can provide possibilities that the past cannot.<sup>29</sup> Tenseless philosophy affirms temporal succession even as it denies the reality of tense, and succession—the difference between earlier and later—misses the logic of the drive.

The rejection of the idea of an open future that occurs with the logic of the drive seems to imply a rejection of human freedom. If the future cannot be fundamentally different from the past, then there is no opportunity for freedom to intervene in the course of events in order to alter them. The idea of freedom appears to depend on the acceptance of temporality. But the logic of the drive does not lead inevitably to determinism. It is, instead, the foundation of a philosophy of freedom. As Kant recognizes, we are not free in time but out of it. He sees only unfreedom in the phenomenal self that exists in time. As long as we consider ourselves purely temporal beings, we will remain caught up in a matrix of causes and effects that leaves no room for freedom, which requires positing the existence of a noumenal self outside of time.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the atemporality of the drive resists the causality of time by rupturing it with the assertion of subjectivity. The drive's repetition is at once the subject's insistence on its own path and its refusal to submit to the reign of causality that governs time. Without the drive, without this repetition of loss that marks our entrance into society, we would have no means for resisting the determining power of causality. For Alenka Zupančič, the drive is "precisely the effect of a dysfunction in the purely linear causality."<sup>31</sup> Our attraction to loss allows us to act contrary to our own interests, to defy the pleasure principle, to interrupt the causality that determines us. The atemporality of the drive allows us to act freely and thus serves as the basis for ethics.

## ATEMPORAL ETHICS

Temporality represents a refuge from the inevitable nature of the

repetition of loss. Both the tensed and tenseless philosophers of time reveal this through their tendency to explain our experience of time by utilizing the contrast between relief and dread. Although we feel relief when traumatic events are in the past, so this line of thought goes, we dread the future occurrence of such events. A. N. Prior defends the tensed theory of time by pointing out that the tensed statement of relief is irreducible to any relational (and tenseless) alternative. He notes that the statement “‘Thank goodness that’s over!’ . . . says something which it is impossible” to convey in a tenseless way.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of whether this is the case, philosophers of time on both sides have accepted Prior’s basic contention that we experience relief when a traumatic event becomes past. The fact that relief plays such a prominent and unquestioned role in arguments about time indicates most forcefully the opposition between temporality and the logic of the drive. The drive allows for no relief: its burden on the subject is never past, and the future holds no promise for escape from it.

We turn to time in order to be able to hope that we will overcome loss, but no amount of time allows us to escape the hold that loss has over us. A new job or a new house may represent a radical transformation, but it won’t change the subject’s relationship to its lost object. Rather than escaping loss, we will repeat it and reenact it, because this repetition, even though it isn’t pleasing to us, holds the secret to our enjoyment. Time promises the possibility of a pleasing escape, but this is a false promise. Though cinema has been implicated in this promise, there have always been countercurrents within cinematic history, and the atemporal mode brings cinema’s ability to disrupt time into the foreground. The close relationship between film and the experience of time is explicitly displaced as these films thrust the spectator into the logic of the drive and its repetition of loss.

The ethical thrust of atemporal cinema stems from its investment in the repetition of the drive at the expense of temporality. The drive houses the subject’s ethical being because it provides constant contact with loss and absence, a contact that forms the basis of our relation to others.<sup>33</sup> What we have in common is what we don’t have rather than anything we do. Though their experiences differ infinitely, all subjects share a basis in loss. Even though a fundamental loss isolates us within our subjectivity, it also provides the only possible basis for connection. Loss is our common constitutive event. The repetition of the drive continually reacquaints us with this event and thus facilitates an ethical relationship to others in which the subject is obligated through the

shared structuring loss.

Though historically cinema played a central role in propagating the ethics of time that animated much twentieth-century thought, atemporal cinema breaks from this association and turns the ethics of time on its head. It locates the ethical position not in submitting to an authentic temporality but in rejecting the notion of temporal difference altogether. Though time may strip away the subject’s isolation, it also implicitly suggests the possibility of overcoming loss, and it is the attempt to move ahead in time and get beyond loss—the attempt to attain wholeness or completion—that is the basis for unethical activity. When Heidegger emphasizes how temporality permits Dasein’s self-transcendence or Levinas focuses on how time marks the opening of the subject to alterity, they do not view time as a way to escape loss, but their commitment to temporality necessarily leads in this direction. The being who is aware of its temporality and who considers time as the source of otherness cannot avoid the idea that the loss animating its present condition might be eliminated or ameliorated.

Rather than leading us in the direction of ethics, the focus on time produces an investment in a future pregnant with possibility, including the possibility of escaping loss. An investment in time implicitly carries with it the promise of a better future, even for those who reject any transcendence. The possibility of ameliorating the traumatic loss that constitutes us leads us to treat others (and ourselves) as mere means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. This possibility provides the basis for a consequentialist outlook in which others become the means for overcoming loss, and their singularity as subjects evaporates. This is why Kant insists that treating others as mere means to an end is treating them immorally. He famously defines the moral law as the avoidance of this: “*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.*”<sup>34</sup> This position more accessible when one becomes a subject of the drive.

The subject of the drive reverses the relationship between means and ends. The end for this subject—the object of desire—becomes a means for sustaining the drive rather than a source of satisfaction in itself. I seek out a box of candy not for the satisfaction that would come from the actual eating of it but for the satisfaction that comes from seeking out the box of candy, and eating it functions as a means for continuing to seek it. The pleasure in the act of eating no longer exists

as distinct from the search for this pleasure. For the subject of the drive, the means becomes the end. This subject uses temporal goals as a way of sustaining the repetition of the drive rather than using the drive to achieve temporal goals. In this way, the drive inverts the commonsensical and consequentialist thinking that dominates our typical approach to the world and to ethics. Rather than valuing the end result or ultimate good, one values the means by which one arrives at this result. From this perspective, someone's significance no longer lies in the use to which they might be put. Getting beyond temporality—which means getting beyond our very ability to get beyond traumatic loss—is the key to approaching others in their singularity rather than reducing this singularity to a tool serving a greater purpose. One treats others and oneself ethically only when one is out of time, and contemporary atemporal cinema works to place us in this position.<sup>35</sup>

## THE CODE

Almost all of the films of the atemporal mode show the ethical nature of the drive, but it becomes especially evident in Michael Haneke's *Code Inconnu* (*Code Unknown*, 2000). Given the title of the film and what happens in the various scenes, *Code Unknown* would appear to be an exploration of an absence of ethical relations or of relations as such. No one knows the code that would unlock the secret of someone else, and everyone remains a fundamental mystery to each other within the film's reality. Haneke depicts a series of misunderstandings or failures to understand, each a few minutes in length and occurring without a clear chronology that unites them together. There are no cuts within the scenes, but each one ends with a hard cut to a few seconds of a black screen, after which the next scene commences.<sup>36</sup> The film leaves the connection between the scenes ambiguous for the spectator: though the same characters appear in the different scenes, neither the movement of time nor the flow of events unites the scenes that follow each other. Whereas within each scene a strict forward moving temporality governs the action (which occurs in real time due to the use of the single shot), the relationship between the scenes—which is also the relationship between the shots—shows no deference to a linear chronology. The experience within the diegetic reality is opposed to that of the spectator watching the film. Time for the spectator is cut up and loops back on itself, whereas time flows uninterrupted for the characters within each scene.

Many films use editing, shot composition, or other formal techniques to recreate the experience that dominates within the film's diegetic reality. There is a wide variety of examples of this practice in the history of cinema. For instance, in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), Jean-Luc Godard's division of the film into twelve discrete sections produces for the spectator the episodic and disconnected life of Nana (Anna Karina). In a radically different case, Francis Ford Coppola manipulates the audio track of *The Conversation* (1974) in order to produce the paranoia in the spectator that Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) experiences in the film. And in yet another variant, Spike Lee uses a montage sequence of characters speaking ethnic slurs directly to the camera in *Do the Right Thing* (1989) as a way of approximating the charged atmosphere of the Brooklyn neighborhood depicted in the film. These films and uncountable others enact an homology between content and form; that is, the experience of the form allows the spectator to grasp the meaning of the content. Haneke's film proceeds in the opposite direction.

*Code Unknown* associates misunderstanding and disconnection with the forward moving temporality that occurs within the scenes, and it associates understanding and connection with the interruption of temporality that exists between them. Within each scene, the unknown code represents the barrier to ethical subjectivity. Characters continually misunderstand each other and do excessive violence to each other as a result of this misunderstanding. In the second scene of the film, the police arrest Amadou (Ona Lu Yenke) for creating a public disturbance when he is actually the one character in the scene attempting to act ethically. Like the deaf children playing charades at the beginning and end of the film, the police—and all the other people in the scene—cannot crack the code of Amadou's act. Their racism leads them to see him as threatening rather than as conscientious. In this scene, racism is a large part of the barrier between characters, but the barrier remains when the racial dynamics change in subsequent scenes. The film ends with Georges (Thierry Neuvic) being locked out of the apartment that he shares with Anne (Juliette Binoche); here, there is no racial tension, but there is nonetheless another misconnection.

The misunderstandings depicted within the film are inextricable from the temporality in which they unfold. The unrelenting forward movement of each shot/scene allows for no experience of constitutive loss or absence, and all the characters in the film inhabit this universe of pure temporality. Time presses forward and affords no opportunity to



experience loss as such. The absence of a cut in the scenes mirrors the sense of time pressing in the filmic content. Within certain scenes, however, characters try to create instances of loss in order to break out of this inexorable temporality. The Father (Josef Bierbichler) senselessly kills his own cattle, and Amadou's friend (Florence Loiret) discards her watch into an ashtray after Amadou responds indifferently to it. But these acts of sacrifice do not go far enough to change the operative relationship to time in the diegetic reality. It is only through the cuts between the scenes—that is, in the experience of the spectator, not that of the characters in the film—that a constitutive absence emerges.

The unknown code acts as a barrier to understanding and connection in the diegesis; it provides the source of understanding and connection for the spectator watching the film. Spectators can make sense of the film despite the absence of temporal continuity in the narrative structure. This sense derives from the way that the hard cut to the black screen punctuates each scene and gives the scene its significance within the film.<sup>37</sup> The gap within the filmic discourse—the black screen, the unknown code—bonds the scenes and the characters together for the spectator. The point at which the filmic discourse interrupts the story becomes the key to understanding the story.

In the same sense, the unconscious, which interrupts the flow of meaning in our everyday interactions and thus separates us from each other, is at once the sole basis for a connection with each other. Without the unconscious interruption, we would have no access to the other's desire. The unconscious blocks meaning at the same time that it opens up another plane of understanding. Without the interruption or moment of loss in the experience of watching *Code Unknown*, the spectator would be left in the same position as the characters within the diegetic reality—blocked by the unknown code rather than enabled by it. The atemporality of the filmic discourse allows for connections that the temporality of the diegesis excludes. The spectator has an ethical possibility that does not exist for the characters. In this sense, *Code Unknown* lays out the wager of the atemporal mode with the utmost clarity: it locates the ethics of the drive in the turn away from cinematic chronological temporality.

The juxtaposition of a strict chronological temporality within each scene and an atemporal structure between the scenes marks the genius of *Code Unknown*. The moments of black screen that connect the various scenes allow the spectator to understand what's happening in a

way that the characters within the film, who don't have the advantage of any gaps within the forward movement of time, cannot. By predicating understanding on the break from temporality, the film makes explicit the association of ethics and loss that the atemporal mode as such propagates. The repetition of loss in the drive occurs in time but without regard to it. No amount of time frees the subject from this repetition. But constitutive loss is not just the source of trauma; it is also the source of understanding and connection.

By reorienting the spectator's experience of temporality in the way that *Code Unknown* does, atemporal cinema enacts a spatialization of time. Philosophers and social critics have historically identified the spatialization of time with exploitation and regimentation. But the atemporal cinematic mode challenges this identification and makes the case for an ethical possibility inherent in the spatialization of time. The films in this mode take the spatialization of time as their point of departure, but they do so in order to reveal what is more foundational for the subject than time. In this way, they show how the spatialization of time might lead to an ethical possibility that at first it appears to occlude entirely.

## THE SPATIALIZATION OF TIME

Thinkers from across the political spectrum have condemned the spatialization of time for its injurious effects on our ethical and political being. The spatialization of time began with the invention of the simplest clock—the sundial or the water clock—that transforms time by measuring it in terms of space. Once measured in this way, time ceases to be the experience of duration and takes on the attributes of distance. The future becomes equivalent to a faraway place toward which one is traveling, and the past becomes equivalent to the place left behind. It is theoretically appropriate that the exigencies of movement in space (specifically, sea navigation) have acted as the chief motivation for advances in timekeeping. The clock is nothing but an objective correlative of the desire to spatialize time. Once the spatial model intrudes, it dominates the experience of temporality, leaving the subject unable to consider time in terms other than spatial ones.

With the modern clock, this transformation is clearly evident: time passes when the hands of the clock move. As a result, movement defines temporality, rather than the other way around.<sup>38</sup> And this

movement, especially with clocks that don't have a sweeping second hand or with digital clocks or with the swinging of a pendulum, occurs through completely regularized intervals. Time on the clock is nothing but movement and is, due to its complete spatialization, totally regimented. The possibility of the unexpected and unknown moment, which is always potentially just ahead in time, ceases to exist when the clock serves as the mode for expressing temporality.<sup>39</sup>

The regulation of time undergoes an exponential leap forward with the birth of the capitalist mode of production, an event that coincides roughly with the emergence of the modern clock. The demands that capitalist mass production makes on workers require that they begin to conceive of time in spatial terms. Workers must arrive at the factory at a precise time each day, must work for a specified number of hours, and must leave at a certain time as well. There is no room within the capitalist work schedule for the experience of time outside of the strictly regulated spatialization that the factory forces on workers, as Charlie Chaplin so effectively satirizes in the opening of *Modern Times* (1936). But this spatialization goes far beyond the factory and infiltrates every aspect of the capitalist subject's temporal existence. One cannot invest oneself in the spatialization of time at work while experiencing an authentic temporality at home. Everything within capitalist society—sleeping, eating, parenting, and even enjoying oneself—runs according to the logic of spatialized time.

Capitalism treats time as an entity that can be broken up into discrete parts in order that it might be bought, sold, and used. Time becomes a quantity rather than a qualitative experience in the process of reification. Reification transforms the temporality (and the labor) of the production process into the spatial form of a commodity. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács elaborates on the deformation that time undergoes with the transition to a capitalist economy. According to Lukács, "time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space."<sup>40</sup> Under capitalist relations of production, one ceases to live time and begins to have it. Workers have their time that they sell, while consumers have their time free to purchase commodities, and everyone spends their time. The emergence of capitalist ideology spatializes time by transforming it into another form of property.

The debilitating effects of the capitalist spatialization of time occasion romantic reactions against it, like that of Henry David Thoreau, who exhorts his readers to simplify their lives and live according to their own pace. But such reactions have had limited success against the march of the capitalist system. The spatialization of time makes itself felt in the very core of capitalist production through the creation of surplus value. In order to create and realize surplus value, capitalists, every bit as much as workers, must treat time as space. Time presents a problem for the capitalist eager to create surplus value because of time's finitude for human beings. The working day represents a limit for capital's ability to create surplus value: even under the harshest conditions and with the minimization of necessary labor time, there is a natural limit to the number of hours in a day that a worker can devote to surplus labor. All workers must sleep and eat in order to reproduce themselves as workers.

But by spatializing the working day, the capitalist evades the seemingly intractable limit that time poses. As Marx notes in the *Grundrisse*,

But the working day, regarded spatially—time itself regarded as space—is *many working days alongside one another*. The more working days capital can enter into exchange with at once, during which it exchanges *objectified for living labour*, the greater its realization *at once*. It can leap over the *natural* limit formed by one individual's living, working day, *at a given stage in the development of the forces of production* (and it does not in itself change anything that this stage is changing) only by positing *another* working day alongside the *first* at the same time—by the spatial addition of *more simultaneous working days*. E.g. I can drive the surplus labour of A no higher than 3 hours; but if I add the days of B, C, D etc., then it becomes 12 hours. In place of a surplus time of 3, I have created one of 12.<sup>41</sup>

According to the logic necessitated by capitalism, one vanquishes the unsurpassable temporality of the working day—and thus increases the possibilities for the creation of surplus value—by spatializing it and thereby transforming the single working day (or successive working days) into multiple ones that coexist alongside each other. In order to increase the percentage of surplus labor in relation to necessary labor, the capitalist must treat temporal limits as spatial ones. One can overcome the limits of space where one cannot overcome the limits of time, but

one does so only at the cost of depriving everyone of more and more time.

Capitalism cannot function as an economic system without this constant expansion, an expansion that depends on the increasing spatialization of time. Capitalists sustain their rate of profit by increasing the percentage of surplus labor and decreasing the percentage of necessary labor, which increases the rate of surplus value. A stable rate of surplus value would precipitate a catastrophe for the system because it would leave capitalists without the capital required to reproduce themselves as capitalists. The excess created by capitalism's constant expansion is what sustains the capitalist system. It is, in fact, the genius of capitalism that it lives on excess rather than drowning in it or sacrificing it, as traditional societies did, and it produces this excess principally through the spatialization of time.

The problem with the spatialization of time stems not just from its role in exacerbating the exploitation of the working class but also its manner of deforming existence itself and thereby depriving not only the working class but all subjects of the possibility for freedom. The two great critics of capitalism's spatialization of time are both decidedly not Marxist in their orientation. In different ways, Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger both see how capitalist modernity has eviscerated the experience of time by transforming it into space, and they speculate on the deleterious effects of this transformation on human freedom.<sup>42</sup>

## THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SPACE

For Bergson, spatializing time blinds us to time's absolute heterogeneity, to the newness inherent in the continuum of time. When we repress the awareness of our temporality by spatializing it, we allow the spatiality of the external world to dictate our actions rather than acting freely from within time, which is internal to us. Bergson contends that "our life unfolds in space rather than in time; we live for the external world rather than for ourselves; we speak rather than think; we 'are acted' rather than act ourselves. To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration."<sup>43</sup> Spatial existence is necessarily existence at the behest of an external authority; temporality or duration allows the subject to break from this authority. When one exists in an authentic temporality, one is not looking to validate or justify one's being. Bergson thus identifies freedom with the act of

situating oneself in time and existing as a pure duration.

Heidegger's critique of the spatialization of time focuses less directly on the effects of this process on human freedom, though this is ultimately a central reason for his concern. Heidegger indicts the history of Western thought for producing an inauthentic conception of time in which time is reduced to a series of discrete moments (or a series of nows), which is the error that leads to Zeno's paradoxes. The wrongheaded idea of the subject itself—a self-identical timeless being that falls into time as a milieu exterior to it—is the inevitable product of an inauthentic temporality. As Heidegger sees it, there is no subject at all because Dasein (the one being that has the ability to question its own being because of its self-transcending structure) is irretrievably identified with temporality and has no essence outside of time. But when Dasein spatializes time and thereby conceives of itself as a subject and as having an essence, it loses touch with itself because it is defined by nothing but its authentic temporality. The deception of subjectivity alienates Dasein from its own finitude and gives Dasein over to an anonymous public. In this sense, there is, despite their profound philosophical differences, a fundamental link between Heidegger's critique of the spatialization of time and Bergson's. In both cases, the failure to experience time in its own form leaves one within the domain of an external authority.

Though neither Bergson nor Heidegger align themselves in any way with the Marxist project, they both effectuate a critique of the underlying logic of capitalism proximate to that of Marx. The spatialization of time coincides with the workers' loss of the surplus that they produce, and this loss is a loss of freedom. As Marx conceives it in the third volume of *Capital*, the realm of freedom exists on the basis of the realm of necessity, just as surplus labor exists on the basis of necessary labor. Without some necessary labor, there would be no surplus labor, and without a fully realized realm of necessity, there would be no realm of freedom. Surplus labor parallels the realm of freedom: freedom is the result of an excess that human productivity unleashes; a society without excess production would be a society without any freedom at all. The expropriation of the workers' surplus labor by capitalists for the sake of profit is effectively the theft of the workers' freedom, as freedom is located in the production of excess. The spatialization of time is destruction of freedom, a destruction that now proceeds unabated.

The critiques that Bergson and Heidegger make concerning the spatialization of time today seem at once quaint and more significant than ever. If the exigencies of the onset of capitalism pushed the spatialization of time forward dramatically, the digital era appears even more revolutionary in this regard. Digital technology eviscerates the experience of authentic temporality, leaving contemporary subjects adrift in the experience of an eternal present. The capacity of this technology for retaining the past without losing any of its details completes the spatialization of time. Whereas time presents us with insurmountable obstacles—no amount of effort can force time to move backward, for instance—space offers us distances that we can traverse, given the technology and the time. Through the use of digital technology, every temporal limit disappears into a spatial one. The question of apprehending all the details of a historical moment becomes a question of storage space rather than one of time.

The difference between analogue and digital recording illustrates the extent of the transformation that has taken place. Analogue recording devices communicate the passing of time through the breakdown of the recording medium. The quality of a tape deteriorates over time, which allows listeners to have some experience of temporality even as the recording attempts to defy it and preserve the present of the recorded event.<sup>44</sup> Because it is infinitely transferable without a loss in quality, a digital recording does not deteriorate and thus does not communicate any experience of temporality. A digital recording made twenty years and a digital recording made twenty minutes ago are indistinguishable for the listener.

But it is not just in the absence of deterioration that the full spatialization of time makes itself felt today. It consumes every arena of contemporary life. The existence of the Internet ensures that one never has to wait for information. One can hear or read commentary on an event without waiting for the event to end. Face-book and Twitter permit instant updates concerning the activities of our friends and acquaintances, so that we never have to wait for a phone call, a letter, or a personal visit to find out what they're doing. Twenty-four-hour television news coverage allows us to watch history unfold in real time rather than listening to stories about it after the fact.<sup>45</sup> Most Americans watched the towers of the World Trade Center fall as they were actually falling, for instance, rather than seeing it happen on tape or hearing about it after the fact. The temporal immediacy of contemporary life

signifies the absence of any experience of time. Time is what we experience when we are forced to wait, when we rely on stories of what has happened, and when we encounter an absolute limit in any form. There is a lessening of temporality in the digital universe, and the time stamps that appear on our digital images or recordings play the role of fetishes obscuring time's increasing absence.

## THE END OF IMPOSSIBILITY

The evanescence of time as a limit in the digital era has the potential to inaugurate a fundamental change in the subject of desire. The subject's desire depends on a temporal distance between the desiring subject and the object desired. Time inserts itself between the desiring subject and the object that would appear to satisfy that desire: desire exists in the interval between an initial awareness of the object of desire and the moment of obtaining that object. This temporal distance is essential for nourishing desire because it allows the subject to believe that the realization of desire is a future possibility. I recognize that I don't have what I want right now, but I can see the realization of my desire in the future. Though this future never comes—one obtains objects but never *the* object—and the subject's desire necessarily remains unrealized, the idea that desire might be realized has the effect of keeping desire alive, which is crucial to the functioning of capitalism as a socioeconomic system.

Capitalism is able to grab hold of subjects because it appeals to them on the level of desire, and the consumer of capitalist goods is the archetypal subject of desire. Writing itself on top of the structure of desiring subjectivity, capitalism profits from the nature of desire itself in order to continually expand itself and secure its position as seeming the only socioeconomic alternative today. Capitalism depends on subjects who believe that consumption will provide them with objects that will answer their desires, and this belief is dependent on the idea that the subject's lost object, the object that would bring the ultimate satisfaction, is accessible. The promise of the accessibility of the lost object—not the accessibility itself—is the key to producing subjects invested in the consumption of more and more commodities. The fact that every commodity disappoints and fails to deliver the lost object has historically strengthened the psychic investment in capitalism rather than attenuating it. The more the commodity fails, the more consumers invest themselves

in the future and in the commodities to come. But this investment depends on not recognizing the inevitability of the failure, which is a possibility that digital technology inaugurates.

Digital technology has the effect of eliminating all barriers between the subject and the object of desire. Within the digital universe, there is no barrier that one cannot overcome. This is the case even with the relatively primitive activity of surfing the Internet. The existence of the Internet as a resource for information and knowledge provides instant access to anything one wants to know. As a result, the experience of desiring to recover some piece of lost information increasingly becomes impossible to sustain. For instance, while teaching George Stevens's *Western Shane* (1953), I remembered a contemporary film in which banter takes place concerning the fate of Shane at the end of the film. I spent a few minutes trying to recall the film and then asked a colleague if he could help me. Though he didn't know the answer, he knew that simply entering "Shane" and "ending" on an Internet search would quickly produce the answer—and it did. Rather than spending days thinking about the possibilities and asking other friends, the Internet provided an instant resolution and thereby diminished the importance of the object. I knew the answer, but I lost the object. I experienced the fleeting pleasure of finding the correct answer instead of the prolonged satisfaction of desiring it, and the fleeting pleasure revealed the emptiness of the object. This resolution and others like it make immediately evident the gap between the satisfaction that one expects from desire's realization and that which one receives.

A similar elimination of the time for desiring operates in viewing films at home, as each technological development lessens the time lag between a desire and its realization. Prior to the invention of the VCR, one had to wait for a desired film to appear on television. In the 1980s, the emergence of the video store permitted one to have quick access to the object. But the birth of on-demand technology in recent years completely eliminates the gap between desire and the object. As was the case with the allusion to *Shane*, on-demand technology has the effect of deflating the object by rendering it immediately accessible. When one can have any film at any time, each individual film loses much of its sublimity.

The point is not that desire suffocates through instantly obtaining its object but that it becomes increasingly difficult to invest oneself in the project of desire when one recognizes that the object will never be *the*

object, that the object of desire will never bring the satisfaction that it promises. Instant access to the object has the effect of revealing the object's insignificance for desiring subjectivity, if we pay attention to this diminution of the object. If no object can satisfy desire, desire must proceed for its own sake, which means that it must become drive. The drive is what remains of desire after the image of realization has been stripped away. It is desire without the hope of obtaining the object, desire that has become indifferent to its object. The spatialization of time through digital technology creates access to the atemporality of the drive, an atemporality in which the future holds no possibility for the realization of desire. Subjects who recognize the atemporality of the drive cease to relate to the world primarily as consumers (which is not to say, of course, that they stop buying things altogether).<sup>46</sup>

Capitalism's spatialization of time has created a condition in which the temporality necessary for the reproduction of consumers has become minimized. The development of digital technology creates the possibility for the transformation of the subject of desire on which capitalist relations of production depend. The immediacy created by digital technology plants the seeds for the recognition of the subject of the drive—a subject who recognizes the constitutive unattainability of its lost object—out of the subject of desire, and the emergence of this subject would thwart capitalist relations of production. The subject of the drive, the subject who recognizes the necessary failure of the pursuit of its object and finds satisfaction in this failure, is not a good consumer, and the proliferation of such subjects portends the possibility a transformation of capitalist relations of production. On the one hand, the spatialization of time plays a part in subjecting individuals to the capitalist mode of production; on the other hand, it has the potential to liberate them from their position as perpetual consumers.

There is, of course, nothing necessary about the emergence of the subject of the drive. The contemporary spatialization of time may simply continue to produce dissatisfied subjects of desire who continue to increase their investment in the illusory promise embodied by the commodity. As long as we experience the object's failure as contingent rather than necessary, we will remain subjects of desire devoted to the capitalist mode of production. As long as we experience this particular Coke rather than the commodity itself as dissatisfying, we will remain devoted consumers. The key to breaking from this devotion lies in grasping the necessity of the failure, and this is what today's near-complete spatialization of time makes possible. For the subject of



the drive, success must become impossible, and failure must become necessary. Even if they grasp the necessity of the failure, there is no guarantee that subjects will have this experience and not retreat into cynicism, which is a mode of keeping alive the dream of successfully attaining the lost object while fetishistically denying one's investment in this idea. Cynicism constitutes the primary ethical and political danger today because it allows subjects to acknowledge the hopelessness of consumption while simultaneously consuming with as much hope as the most naïve consumer. Cool detachment is never as detached as it pretends to be. The cynical subject recognizes the logic of the drive and clings nonetheless to the promise of desire.

The emergence of the subject of the drive from the subject of desire is the aim of the psychoanalytic process, and in this sense, psychoanalysis represents an anticonsumer practice.<sup>47</sup> But the instant access of the digital era allows for the expansion of this psychoanalytic dynamic well beyond the clinic. Even those who can't afford or would never enter psychoanalysis can experience the illusory status of every object of desire. The transformation from the subject of desire to the subject of the drive does not involve the birth of a new form of subjectivity but rather the uncovering of the logic that unconsciously animates whatever form that subjectivity takes. The subject of the drive lies hidden within every subject of desire, and uncovering it is the ethical task of atemporal cinema. After a century devoted to the ethics of time in which psychoanalysis presented an atemporal ethical alternative, this new cinematic mode marks the end of the twentieth century by bringing the psychoanalytic alternative into a wider cultural circulation.

## OUT OF TIME

The theorization of the cinema found in the thought of Bazin, Kracauer, and Deleuze focuses on the cinema's ability to present an authentic experience of temporality. In this sense, they each see in their own way how cinema might act as a rampart against the spatialization of time, a place where temporality remains a viable existential possibility, despite the disappearance of time outside the cinema. In the vein of this theoretical approach, many filmmakers have consecrated their cinema to temporality and the spectator's experience of it. Contemporary directors such as Wes Anderson, Claire Denis, Jim Jarmusch, and Wim Wenders have created films that prioritize the experience of time, following in the

direction established by figures such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and Satyajit Ray. But others have taken the opposite approach: rather than holding onto temporality, they have begun to embrace the spatialization of time and to explore its ramifications. Though the cinema can present an authentic experience of temporality, it can also create a world where time as we understand it no longer exists, and the latter has recently emerged as the radical edge of contemporary cinema.

The use of editing to disrupt standard narrative time is not new but has occurred since the silent era. By overlapping shots depicting the same movement in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), Sergei Eisenstein challenged the idea of time as a regulated order, and by breaking down the distinction between scenes from the present and scenes from the past in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961) and other films, Alain Resnais created an experience of time that did not fit into a linear narrative. But these innovations remained isolated exceptions within the history of cinema, a history dominated by temporal linearity. But starting in the 1990s, more and more filmmakers have taken up an atemporal narrative mode, and as they do so, they are changing the way that the cinema as such relates to time. Anomalous disruptions of traditional filmic temporality in the history of cinema have become a path-breaking movement within contemporary cinema.

Beginning with Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), the contemporary atemporal cinema emerged and has been developing with increasingly philosophical complexity. Though Tarantino's films mark the beginning of this cinematic movement, they stand apart for their use of atemporality to create a more authentic temporality. *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* jumble the linearity of time, but they do so in order to emphasize cinema's creative power to generate the new out of the seemingly hackneyed past. By recycling the history of cinema, Tarantino produces the new, just as his narratives discover spontaneity even when they move backward in time.

Despite his presence at the forefront of the contemporary atemporal movement, Quentin Tarantino's films do not share the approach to cinematic time that animates the other films within this movement. Whereas Tarantino disrupts the linearity of filmic narrative and thereby affirms the fecundity of the past, someone like Christopher Nolan does so in order to show the poverty of the future. Through their temporal dislocations, Nolan's films *Memento* (2000) and *The Prestige* (2006), like other films in the atemporal movement, reveal that the future does not

hold the solution to the problem of desire and that the destiny of the subject is one of a failed repetition rather than progress toward possible success.

In *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*, Garrett Stewart recognizes the deformation of time that these films produce. He claims, "Time is reduced, in the plastic bases of its own thematic, to a permeable optic field—differential from the inside out rather than, as in filmic cinema, troped for the most part by way of deferral, succession, and return."<sup>48</sup> By creating what Stewart calls the timespace-image, contemporary atemporal films depict time as malleable rather than constant. For Stewart, they realize the twentieth century's theorization of time rather than breaking from it. As a result, Stewart approaches but doesn't arrive at the direction in which the deformation of time in these films leads. The contemporary atemporal movement in cinema departs from the traditional logic of desire that dominates both cinema and capitalist society, and it adheres to the logic of the drive, in which satisfaction is located in the repetition of a failed encounter with the object rather than in its successful attainment.

Unlike the logic of desire, the logic of the drive does not respect the forward movement of time but remains attached to repetition. Desire moves in a linear fashion from object to object through time, seeking out the object of desire that would finally bring satisfaction. But from the perspective of the drive, time is an illusion created to hide the necessary failure in the subject's relation to its lost object. In this sense, there is a link between the logic of the drive and the nature of cinematic projection. The experience of time in the cinema has always been an experience of the reassembling of pieces of frozen time into the illusion of temporal movement. The time that one experiences within a filmic diegesis is always an illusory time, even if it might allow the spectator to gain access to an otherwise inaccessible authentic temporality. Rather than experiencing time, one experiences twenty-four still images per second. For the spectator, the uninterrupted movement of time depends on not seeing or not recognizing the blank spaces between the images. The presence of the image for spectators depends on them not seeing the absence that constitutes the image. Successful film spectatorship relies on a certain failure of perception, just as the traditional pleasure a film offers relies on a failure to recognize the illusory status of the promise of change.

Atemporal cinema works to transform the way that spectators enjoy

the cinema. Traditional Hollywood cinema and even most oppositional cinemas ensconce spectators in the logic of desire. By opposing both, a group of films that adheres to the logic of the drive represents an ethical landmark in the history of cinema. The ideological function of the cinema within capitalist society has always centered on its ability to produce and sustain desiring subjects. The popularity of the cinema during times of economic hardship, such as the Great Depression and the financial crisis of 2008, attests to its success in performing this role. By breaking from the logic of desire, the atemporal mode challenges the role that cinema plays within capitalism. It contributes to capitalism's spatialization of time, but it does so in a way that produces a subject of the drive, a subject unable to believe in the promise of the commodity and thus more capable of comporting itself as an ethical being rather than as a consumer. The proper spectator of atemporal cinema—the ethical subject of the drive—comes to enjoyment in means rather than ends. Of course, there are few spectators who accede to the logic of the drive that these films present just by the fact of watching them, but the films nonetheless inaugurate the possibility of such accession.

The contemporary atemporal mode is the product of the digital era and its complete spatialization of time. Without the Internet or virtual reality, its proliferation would be unimaginable. Though they may diminish or even disappear as the digital era becomes more firmly entrenched, the disruption marked by contemporary atemporal films will remain. If the time-image is, as Deleuze suggests, the hidden essence of the cinema, films that embrace the logic of the drive betray this essence as a result of their interaction with the demands of the thoroughly spatialized time of digital capitalism. The atemporal movement's betrayal of the essence of the cinema sets out a path on which the cinema can remain a culturally vital and politically significant medium today. Although on the one hand the encounter with current phenomena like video games has dramatically impoverished the cinema, the encounter with the digital era's complete spatialization of time has the opportunity to save it. A new ethics of the cinema is visible in the turn away from time.

The chapters that follow focus on eight distinct yet representative films of atemporal cinema. One could imagine twice as many chapters, but this would occasion sustaining the repetitive logic of the drive beyond a point at which anyone—writing or reading—could tolerate it. The decision to limit the book to eight chapters represents the one major concession to time. Atemporal films other than the eight primary

ones appear at various points throughout the chapters when their structures and themes intersect with that of the film under discussion. In this sense, though each chapter addresses a specific film, a controlling idea about contemporary atemporal cinema underlies and motivates the discussion of that film in the chapter. The chapters are thus divided by idea as much as they are by film.

In keeping with the idea of a turn away from time, the book has not been arranged chronologically but according to the idea of atemporality. Though the first chapter deals with the first film to appear (*Pulp Fiction*), subsequent chapters do not address films in the order that they were released. The chapter on *Pulp Fiction* is anomalous because the film itself, as a result of its investment in temporality, is an anomaly of the atemporal mode. It is the only chapter in chronological order because it is the only film discussed that invests itself in the promise of temporality. The arrangement of the subsequent chapters, in contrast, defies chronology. Rather than indicating progress toward a goal, the order of the chapters reveals an increasing investment in the embrace of trauma. Eric Bress and J. Mackye Gruber's *Butterfly Effect* (2004), discussed in chapter 2, depicts a relatively stable existence emerging through the sacrifice of the privileged object; Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* (2002), discussed in the final chapter, makes clear the inextricable link between the happiest moments of life and the most horrific traumas. The movement from *Butterfly Effect* to *Irréversible* shows trauma becoming more and more foregrounded in the intervening chapters. Each movement forward involves a further elaboration of loss and a further exploration of the enjoyment that the drive provides. The enjoyment of the drive lies in the affirmation of loss.